The Discourse of Chiefs: Notes on a Melanesian Society

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> After ten years of independence, . . . it's about time to review the constitution . . . to see if the chiefs [are] where they were supposed to be and adjust their powers.
>
> VINCENT BOULEKONE, *Vanuatu Weekly*

> To get the chiefs back to full spectrum of development of our nation, the following steps should be taken . . . Amend the Solomon Islands Constitution. . . . to legislate the roles and functions of the chiefs.
>
> *Report of the Provincial Government Review Committee*

> Some people, mainly politicians, have used culture, custom, and custom chiefs for their own aims. Custom and culture must develop freely, and should not be encouraged or forced by any European system of legislation.
>
> WALTER LINI, *Beyond Pandemonium*

> A new breed of neo-politicians [has] emerged introducing chief-systems where there was none before. . . . to confuse not only themselves but the people they claim to represent.
>
> FRANCIS BUGOTU, *Solomon Star*

Once regarded as relics of an earlier time destined for obsolescence, chiefs are more visible today than ever in the political life of Pacific Island states. As the governments of newly independent island nations debate the course of development, "traditional chiefs" are a frequent topic of discussion and legislative interest.[1] In the Polynesian states of Tonga and Western Samoa, where political rights commonly are determined by chiefly sta-

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tus, recent events reveal pressures for greater democratization.[2] Ironically, however, in Melanesia where societies often are said to have "big men" but no real chiefs, widespread efforts are underway to empower "traditional chiefs" by creating councils of chiefs and otherwise involving them in the workings of government.

What is this renewed interest in chiefs all about? I take up this question by considering events in Santa Isabel in Solomon Islands where people recently have revived a position of paramount chief and are engaged in efforts to institutionalize a Council of Chiefs as part of the apparatus of provincial government. On the one hand these developments may be seen as a response to developments in a postcolonial political arena where national leaders espouse policies of decolonization and decentralization that include support for "traditional chiefs." On the other hand, when seen in historical perspective, these activities constitute but the latest manifestation of a continuing discourse on identity and power that has always occupied the borderland between local and global polities. To foreshadow the conclusions to follow, I suggest that a fuller understanding of this borderland requires an appreciation of both local culture and local history; and that such an appreciation is the best antidote to interpretations that variously romanticize or delegitimize chiefs in contemporary Melanesian societies.

Historically, colonial governments throughout Melanesia sought out local leaders they could recognize as their representatives for purposes of "indirect rule"—a notion derived from African experience (Akin n.d.). Even as colonial officers noted the absence of "hereditary rulers" in many areas, they readily lent government recognition to leaders they called "chiefs" wherever possible. Chiefs had some role in the colonial administrations of the British in Fiji (Kaplan 1989), in Solomon Islands (White 1991) and in Vanuatu (Allen 1984), and of the French in New Caledonia and Vanuatu (Douglas 1982; Guiart 1956). However, with the development of democratic institutions in these countries after World War II, chiefs became increasingly marginal to the course of political and economic change. In counterpoint with these changes, though, chiefs maintained and even increased their significance as symbols of custom and identity. At the time of independence, Fiji, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu recognized the status of chiefs through constitutional provisions specifying advisory roles for chiefs in government (Powles and Pulea 1988; Ghai 1990). In Fiji the 1970 constitution granted the Great Council of Chiefs

representation in the senate and dominion over customary affairs; in Solomon Islands reference was made to "traditional chiefs" advising local government; and in Vanuatu the 1980 Constitution created a National Council of Chiefs with powers to advise on land matters and certain appointments.

Whereas many people may have felt that these constitutional provisions were largely rhetorical in effect, subsequent events in all of these countries have indicated that chiefs continue to be an important focus for postcolonial political reform. The renewed visibility of chiefs in national politics was most evident in Fiji where the Great Council of Chiefs played a key part in legitimizing the two military coups of 1987 and in formulating a new constitution. In less dramatic form, both Solomon Islands and Vanuatu undertook constitutional reviews that included attempts to broaden the role of chiefs in government. In Vanuatu the Vanuaaku Pati's efforts in this direction were expressed recently in the construction of a ceremonial house or National Nakamal for the National Council of Chiefs in the capital, Vila. In Solomon Islands in 1985 the parliament passed an amendment to the Local Courts Act that expanded the powers of chiefs to act as magistrates in land disputes. The government there also undertook reviews of the constitution and of provincial government that recommended including "chiefs and traditional leaders" in new legislative positions (Ghai 1990, 325; SI 1987, chap 5).[3]

Even though the specific political issues are framed somewhat differently in each country, chiefs today are everywhere potent *symbols*—symbols of the indigenous and the traditional in contrast with the foreign and the modern. To talk of chiefs is to talk of "custom." In island communities where moral and political debates often revolve around oppositions of local/foreign, indigenous/Western, and inside/outside, chiefs stand for the local-indigenous-inside dimension of these polarities. Whatever their status or meaning in the pre-European past, chiefs in the contemporary Pacific are today icons of "custom"—personifications of larger ideologies of cultural identity. Inevitably, then, the rhetoric of the old and the customary applied to the new evokes questions about the meaning and authenticity of modern-day chiefs, particularly when they become the subject of official interest from national and provincial politicians. The critical comments of two prominent Melanesians quoted at the outset of this paper (Walter Lini and Francis Bugotu) reflect worries that legislating custom may reify the fluid, personal, and often ambiguous power of tradi-

tional leaders (more on this later). Similarly, for political theorists examining the emergence of class and labor relations in the Pacific, talk of chiefs constitutes a rhetoric used to reproduce power and privilege (Howard 1983; Young 1990). In short, contemporary discourses of chiefs have raised the "specter of inauthenticity" discussed by Margaret Jolly elsewhere in this issue. As a result, talk of chiefs provides an opportunity to explore the construction of tradition as it occurs in settings ranging from village meetings to parliamentary debates—and in anthropological writings.

For anthropology, the discipline that formulated the distinction between Melanesian "big men" and Polynesian "chiefs" (Sahlins 1963; Lindstrom 1982; Marcus 1989),[4] new Melanesian discourses of chiefs are likely to be seen as a process of inventing or constructing tradition. For example, the ironic title of Roger Keesing's 1969 article "Chiefs in a Chiefless Society" presumes two kinds of chiefs—the first ideological and historical (created by the Kwaio of Malaita for specific purposes at a particular historical moment) and the second a more timeless variety as defined by comparative ethnology (a type lacking among the Kwaio). Keesing (1969, 1982) located the introduction of Kwaio chiefs within the context of the postwar Maasina Rule movement. In that historical moment, the rhetoric of custom worked to legitimate the voice of local leaders challenging British rule:

> To establish the legitimacy of *kastom* required legitimation of its spokesmen. Hence the scheme of chiefs had to be validated as customary. . . . (Pre-war experiments in indirect rule probably conveyed to Malaita leaders the message that the authority of local leaders would be bolstered if it was depicted as traditional, validated by custom and accepted by the community.) (Keesing 1982, 361)

In this interpretation, Kwaio chiefs, like Melanesian ideologies of custom in general, originated in the experience of colonial invasion (Keesing 1982; Babadzan 1988). This is a particular case of the more general hypothesis that self-conscious constructions of tradition emerge under conditions of colonization, as a kind of counter-discourse to the dominating forces of Western intrusion. Extending the hypothesis further, local conceptions of tradition may even be seen to derive from colonial categories and institutions (Hanson 1989; Keesing 1989). Recent commentaries on the "invention of tradition," however, have questioned the validity of

any rigid separation between self-conscious, constructed custom and the rest of unspoken, tacit culture (see Jolly, this issue; Linnekin, 1991). By implication, "real" tradition tends to be seen as static and ahistorical rather than as an adaptive and changing process.

In this discussion of chiefs I suggest that even though these arguments provide a more sophisticated concept of culture as *always* creatively reconstructed (cf Wagner 1975), the focus on cultural invention draws attention away from the substantial cultural and historical continuities that give so-called invented forms much of their emotional and political power. Interpreting concepts of "custom" and "custom chiefs" as responses to colonization tends to overlook the force of indigenous models that contribute to cultural continuity. Furthermore, seeing all culture as created or invented obscures the fact that *local* distinctions of the traditional and the modern may be crucial to debates about truth, power, and legitimacy. Much more careful ethnography is required to understand the operative force of local conceptions of tradition. In this paper I examine a case of ongoing cultural "invention" that nonetheless draws on cultural models and historical precedents that have shaped ideas about chiefs over the course of one hundred years of colonial history and probably longer. Even brief consideration of local discussions of chiefs reveals complex and competing views of the role of perceived custom in constituting the status of "traditional chiefs."

Historicizing Custom: Santa Isabel Chiefs through Time

The efforts on Santa Isabel to create a council of chiefs or, as it is sometimes phrased by leaders of these efforts, to "revive" a "system of chiefs" certainly reflect the influence of Western forms. Chiefs are to be empowered by creating a bureaucratic apparatus modeled on that of a "council" composed of members from "districts" who receive allowances, and so forth. The concepts and terms of Western-style government are appropriated to make something new using the rhetoric of the old. But the new is not so new. A close look shows that attempts to create new roles for chiefs in government and church were pursued from the earliest moments of culture contact. Furthermore, these efforts built upon cultural models of leadership in which chiefs have historically been regarded as mediators of knowledge, power, and identity. In this mediating position, ideas about chiefs are inherently a source of innovation and incorporation.

Chiefs have been objects of political talk and debate on Santa Isabel for more than a century. Chiefs are not only discussed locally, as one would expect, but also have been the focus of considerable interest from missionaries and government officials who regularly have voiced interest in the status and vitality of "traditional chiefs." Foreigners and Santa Isabel people alike talk about chiefs in oppositional terms, counterposing traditional or chiefly leadership with modern Western forms. But the meanings of these oppositions have not been static through time. The significance of chiefs has shifted with changing social and political circumstances. Nineteenth-century Anglican missionaries sought to convert "chiefs" as primary conduits for the work of missionization. They regarded strong Christian chiefs as important allies in promoting and maintaining the new Christian society in the absence of government. But once colonial government was introduced in the twentieth century, chiefs on Santa Isabel came to be regarded by missionaries and others as a kind of antidote for, or complement to, government institutions—institutions regarded as exploitative or mismatched with local custom. More recently these historical meanings of "traditional chiefs" are further transformed by national discourses that have appropriated chiefs as a vehicle for managing political relations between rural localities and a new nation state.

One way of describing the political history of Santa Isabel is as a series of episodes or movements that attempted to redefine or readjust relations between local polities (often identified with one or more chiefs) and encapsulating systems of power. Beginning with wholesale conversion to Christianity, followed by efforts to resist the establishment of a colonial office on the island in 1918, the tumultuous events of World War II and a major postwar movement for political autonomy, and, most recently, national independence in 1978, each juncture was marked by organized attempts at revising the political order. In each epoch the symbolism of chiefs focused and condensed sociopolitical issues of the day. I have discussed Santa Isabel's episodic cultural history in more detail elsewhere (White 1991), and here give a brief accounting, highlighted by examples of talk about chiefs that marked each epoch.

First, however, a few remarks are in order about the nature of indigenous leadership on Santa Isabel. Although my interpretations pertain primarily to one of the island's four major language groups (Cheke Holo) (see White et al. 1988), there are enough similarities across the island to refer here to "Santa Isabel chiefs." However, this glosses over important

differences, and more careful study would be required to validate these generalizations for each of the island's linguistic and regional cultures. This point is significant, however, insofar as the revival of an island-wide "paramount chief" (discussed later) reflects the potential for emergent notions of generic "Santa Isabel" custom that submerge local microtraditions.

Among Cheke Holo speakers, leaders in general and chiefs in particular are referred to as *funei* (from *funu* 'start', 'begin', reflecting the chiefs' role in initiating collective activities such as feast-exchanges, raids and peacemaking, and religious ceremonies). Even allowing for the romanticized views of Europeans whose descriptions of Santa Isabel chiefs were often modeled on Western notions of kingship (eg, Fleurieu 1791) and the larger-than-life quality of many oral histories (eg, Naramana 1987), there is abundant evidence that the most powerful *funei* of the Santa Isabel past exercised considerable political and religious authority like that commonly associated with Polynesian chieftainship (Marcus 1989). Chiefly status was marked by the control and display of wealth such as a large house, numerous pigs, and especially the shell valuables that could be worn on important occasions and exchanged with other chiefs. Interactions with chiefs were supposed to be circumscribed with numerous distinctive forms of etiquette. While there were no strict rules pertaining to the inheritance of chiefly status, chiefship was nonetheless commonly regarded as transmissible. Most people today assume that powerful chiefs will designate a successor who will most likely be either a son or a maternal nephew (as would be expected in light of the local idiom of matrilineal descent). In short, Santa Isabel chiefship draws on a wide field of cultural ingredients that allow for a range of political possibilities, depending on particular configurations of personal, social, and economic circumstances.

Although the English word *chief* appears less frequently in anthropological writings about Melanesia than the more favored *big man,* the term has a long history in the region and may be heard (along with its Pijin counterpart, *sif* or *sifi*) throughout Melanesia today (eg, Alasia 1989). Beginning with the very first encounter between the indigenous population of Santa Isabel and Europeans, prominent leaders termed "chiefs" were the object of interest and comment by Westerners. When Alvaro de Mendaña first landed in the Solomons in 1568 at Estrella Bay in Santa Isabel, he entered into a series of alliances (and conflicts) with local leaders

referred to as "chiefs" in the English translation of his narrative (Amherst and Thomson 1901). He himself appears to have been granted some kind of chiefly status by one leader who, adorned with shell decorations, enacted a brief ritual of recognition by hanging a clam-shell pendant around Mendaña's neck and placing shell armlets on his arms (Amherst and Thomson 1901, 126). As Mendaña wrote, "I understood that he was making me a great present, and that they thought a great deal of it, for these things are worn only by chiefs. When he saw fit to speak, he told me that . . . he wished to be my friend, and his Indians should be my *naclonis* [people], and he and I would be chiefs of that country" (Amherst and Thomson 1901, 126).

Once more regular contacts with Europeans commenced in the nineteenth century, English and Pijin talk of "chiefs" entered readily into political parlance in Santa Isabel as Europeans, some with Polynesian experience, sought out local leaders to further their own dealings in trade or evangelism. In Santa Isabel the accounts of early explorers, traders, and missionaries referred repeatedly to prominent individuals dealt with as "chiefs" (eg, Cheyne 1971; Coote 1883, 140–151; Penny 1888; Wawn 1893, 219). The relations that developed between these chiefs and outsiders were at first beneficial to both sides. Local leaders parlayed entrepreneurial advantage into expanded regional influence, and Westerners gained either trade goods or converts, according to their objectives. But as the penetration of church and state progressed, interactions with outsiders that at first had enhanced the role of chiefs ultimately diminished their power and influence.

The prominence and prestige of chiefs in many parts of Solomon Islands has been read as an index of the health of indigenous traditions. As the colonizing forces of mission and government were seen to erode or supplant the roles of chiefs, their diminished authority and influence personified larger narratives of cultural decline. For example, the missionary Alfred Penny, who was involved with the first wave of Anglican conversions in the nineteenth century, wrote that "With the Tindalos [ancestor spirits] the power of the chiefs has greatly declined. This was inevitable: a chief was powerful because he possessed a powerful Tindalo. I do not speak of this as a benefit. Were it not that in Christian unity at least an equivalent can be found, I should consider it a loss" (Penny 1888, 216–217).

Similarly, in the western Solomons the cessation of headhunting and the

expansion of the Methodist mission were bemoaned by many through expressions of regret about the loss of prestige among well-known chiefs (Hocart 1922). But the narrative of colonization ran somewhat differently in Santa Isabel. Because it suffered through several decades of victimization at the hands of raiding headhunters from islands to the west (Jackson 1975; White 1979), relations with mission and government originated in alliances that saw new forms of expanded chiefship emerge, including that of the first "paramount chief."

Although there is considerable diversity in local understandings of the paramount chief position, nearly all agree that it originated with the conversion in 1889 of a powerful chief named Soga, who subsequently came to be called "paramount chief" by the mission as he rose to a position of islandwide prominence and influence. The strategy of the Melanesian Mission to convert entire communities through the agency of powerful chiefs accelerated with the conversion of Soga and seventy of his followers. Soga, baptized Monilaws Soga, worked closely with Henry Welchman, the missionary most responsible for overseeing conversion of nearly the entire island's population to Christianity around the turn of the century (see Naramana 1987 and Zeva 1983 for comments on the origins of the paramount chief by local authors). In the context of that collaboration Soga built unprecedented influence from one end of Santa Isabel to the other, and extending to the neighboring islands of Savo and Nggela.

Welchman, who worked on Santa Isabel off and on from 1889 until his death there in 1908, was instrumental in creating the status of "paramount chief." In the process, he looked to the new colonial administration to buttress the authority of Soga and other Christian chiefs who played important roles in the new mission society. At Soga's death in 1898, it was apparent that no traditional leader could easily wield the kind of influence he had accrued during the conversion era. Welchman sought to sustain the emerging model of powerful Christian chieftainship by urging local leaders to select a successor to Soga. Welchman tells of counseling chiefs of Santa Isabel (also called Bugotu, at that time) about their selection:

> I called all the chiefs together and a great many of the people came as well. I pointed out to them the mischief that occurred when there were a number of petty chiefs without a head, and also the good that had resulted in Bugotu from Soga's single and strong rule and I asked them to settle then and there, before they separated, what they intended to do. (Wilson 1935, 44)

A year later, in 1899, Welchman was still concerned about this and again "urged them to settle among themselves who should be the leader and the sole judge for Bugotu" (Wilson 1935, 57). When those present selected someone as the successor chief, Welchman commented, "The next step will be to have the election confirmed by the Resident Commissioner, and then I hope we may look for a return to the more law-abiding days of Soga" (Melanesian Mission 1901, 142). This remarkable convergence of church and state support for a Santa Isabel paramount chief followed from the island's unique history of conversion by a single church—the Anglican Melanesian Mission. It also accounted for Welchman's ability to refer to "the leader and sole judge for Bugotu" and, seventy-seven years later, for Santa Isabel's distinctive accomplishment of ritually installing a paramount chief for the entire island in 1975.

The next phase of the island's political evolution saw the government arrive. In 1901, two years after the incorporation of Santa Isabel within the sphere of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate, Resident Commissioner Charles Woodford visited Santa Isabel to engage in the ritual politics of flag-raising. On that occasion he also appointed Soga's designated successor "chief" of the island, thus lending the government's voice to the emerging recognition of chiefs as legitimate mediators between Santa Isabel communities and colonial others. As the government presence grew, these relations were constituted through an evolving succession of types of leaders: after government-appointed chiefs came headmen, councilors, and, today, "members" of the National Parliament and the Provincial Assembly, along with a substantial complement of civil servants.

During the first two decades of colonial government, the administration empowered its representatives (whom it referred to variously as "chiefs" and "headmen") to judge minor offenses and impose fines. For example, in a memorandum that curiously mixes references to local leaders as "chiefs," "headmen," and *"vunagi"* (a vernacular term for "chief"), the acting resident commissioner in 1916 issued a set of guidelines for chiefs to make formal judicial rulings on minor offenses of various kinds. His missive is titled "INSTRUCTIONS for the guidance of Native Chiefs who are District Headmen or Vunagi" (Barnett 1916). These casual arrangements of a distant administration came to a rapid end with the establishment of a government office on the island in 1918.

With the arrival of a European district officer and the initiation of plans to collect taxes in 1921, the colonial administration based at Tulagi in

neighboring Nggela became an increasingly intrusive force in local affairs. Not surprisingly perhaps, these developments were received with some consternation by the Christian chiefs and chiefly catechists who already were well established as the dominant religious-political authorities in the island's newly formed Christian villages. They attempted bravely to submit protests through the offices of the Anglican bishop, beseeching the resident commissioner:

> If it be possible that this White Officer leave us and go away, we do not wish any other white man to take his place for we have already made trial of the White man dwelling among us and all Government laws seem unfair to us. But we wish that *our own chiefs should rule us*. . . . We recognize Our Governor of the British Solomon Islands him alone who lives at Tulagi [the Resident Commissioner]. (WPHC 426/1921, 3 Jan; emphasis added)

Although unsuccessful in having the district officer removed, the pleading note cited here set the tone for subsequent tensions between mission and government on Santa Isabel—tensions that were heightened by the situation of one church/one government on the island. The importance of government for economic and political change increased during the 1920s and 1930s, years marked by the appointments of district headmen who assumed active roles in local affairs. The possibilities for competition between mission-appointed leaders and government leaders came to a head with the arrival of a young missionary named Richard Fallowes in 1930. One of his first responses to what he perceived as the encroachment of government on the moral authority of the church was to appoint "church chiefs" recognized by the mission and ritually installed in church ceremonies all over the island (Hilliard 1974; White, in press). Fallowes' description of this situation reflects his perception that "hereditary chiefs," including a successor to the earlier paramount chief Soga, were the legitimate, if disempowered, leaders of local communities.

> When I arrived at Bugotu about 1931 I found that [a government headman] backed by the D.C. held all the power and the hereditary chiefs including the Soga were ignored. . . . I took it upon myself to get [Soga's] claims more fully recognized & this was not difficult as the village chiefs were fed up with the usurpation of power. (Reverend Richard Fallowes, personal communication, 5 Sept 1976)

During this period in the early 1930s, and subsequently when Fallowes returned in 1938 to lead an interisland effort to establish an indigenous

"parliament," talk of "traditional chiefs" became a recurrent trope in political discourse seeking greater local power and autonomy. As Keesing's statement quoted earlier makes clear, these meanings of the "chief" as a symbol of local autonomy emerged with particular force and clarity in the ideology of the postwar Maasina Rule movement that challenged colonial rule in the Solomons after World War II (Laracy 1983). Interpreters of Maasina Rule have noted the importance of "chiefs" for the movement's organization. The spread of Maasina Rule ideology across Malaita and beyond was marked by the enactment of ceremonies installing movement leaders in positions of chiefly office.

Throughout Santa Isabel's colonial history, the chief remained a central figure as the field of power and meaning in village life was differentiated increasingly by processes of colonization and Christianization. In their former roles as feast-givers, alliance-makers, and warriors, chiefs embodied the vitality and integrity of their regions. It was perhaps inevitable, then, that they would become the focus for efforts at managing relations with external forces of change. If recent attempts to institute a Council of Chiefs are viewed as an activity with significant cultural and historical antecedents, it may be possible to avoid the twin risks of interpreting talk of "traditional chiefs" as either a reification of tradition or as a modern invention reflecting the political rhetoric of the moment.

Creating a Council of Chiefs

In 1975, the year of Solomon Islands self-government and three years before independence, talk of "custom chiefs" and "paramount chiefs" circulated in both Santa Isabel and the national center, Honiara. Local leaders from throughout the archipelago elected to the protectorate's Governing Council discussed the development of national political institutions, and one of the themes in their discussions was the importance of custom and chiefs for the postcolonial political setup. For example, "That in the proposed review of government a function should be found for chiefs in local government bodies; consideration should be given to according chiefs some form of recognition; consideration should be given to holding an annual conference of Elders" (SI 1972).

The Governing Council also discussed giving recognition to paramount chiefs (meaning simply chiefs who stood above village-level chiefs and represented a whole region or language group). No other Melanesian

islands in the Solomons had traditions of islandwide paramount chieftainship, and Santa Isabel's tradition was an avowedly invented one. Given Santa Isabel's unique history of creating a church-supported paramount chief for the entire island, government support for chiefs resonated well with local interests. Similar to previous instances of paramount chiefs on Santa Isabel, the impetus for this latest episode came from a convergence of both local and national forces. The voiced support of national leaders for chiefs coincided with the presence of a unique candidate for the Santa Isabel paramount chief—the man who was then bishop of the island, Dudley Tuti—to make things happen. Tuti's position as bishop, together with his personal reputation and genealogy (he was also the maternal nephew of two men regarded as previous paramount chiefs), crystallized the forces that ultimately produced a major ceremonial installation of him as paramount chief in 1975. This event marked the beginning of efforts to "revive the system of chiefs" that continues to the present.

Many Santa Isabel people are not aware of the history of the paramount chief, and those who are may disagree about how many paramount chiefs there have been, or who they have been. Despite this thicket of disagreement, nearly all agree on the first (Monilaws Soga) and the last (Dudley Tuti). It is important that the recognition of Tuti as paramount chief was not a simple matter of succession, of finding a person to fill a vacant office. When Dudley Tuti was made paramount chief, he did as much to make the status as the status did to make him "paramount."

One of the prime movers in the pre-independence discussions on reviving a "system of chiefs" was a man who would become one of the island's first parliamentarians, Willie Betu. Betu wrote a paper sketching a plan for chiefs, headed by a paramount chief, to have formal position in Santa Isabel government. Betu acknowledged that the Santa Isabel paramount chief originated in the conversion era. In his words, "There were many chiefs, but no paramount chief until Christianity came." Betu's paper outlined a plan in which three "great chiefs," each of whom would represent one of the three major clans on the island, would be selected (by consensus?). These chiefs would then select a paramount chief from among themselves. Betu went on in his paper to list eleven recommendations for implementing such a system, including having the three chiefs sit on the Santa Isabel council with the paramount chief as cochairman. Although the idea of three clan chiefs never took hold, other recommendations, such as including chiefs in council meetings, were eventually instituted

after independence. In particular, his recommendation that "the paramount chief's elevation ceremony . . . take place . . . next year" turned out to be true to the mark.

During the first half of 1975, plans were made for a major feast and ceremony that would simultaneously mark the independence of the Church of Melanesia and install a new paramount chief. Since nearly the entire population belonged to the Church of Melanesia, the occasion conveniently could combine two islandwide events and make practical an event recognizing a paramount chief for the whole island. Because Dudley Tuti was uniquely suited to the position of paramount chief at the time, little effort was expended to determine who should be paramount chief. As bishop, Tuti traveled around the island speaking at meetings where plans for installing a paramount chief were discussed. At one meeting that I attended, he spoke about the purpose of the upcoming ceremony to a group of representatives assembled from several villages. He did not emphasize the connection with the church (particularly through him, the bishop), but referred to the initiatives toward supporting chiefs at the national level by the Governing Council in Honiara. Speaking somewhat coyly (in Pijin), he spoke as if no one had yet been finally designated to be the paramount chief.

> The Governing Council [in Honiara] have thought about this for a long time. . . . They want to include some chiefs in the government for governing the country. . . . And every island will choose one or two or three, according to their custom. . . . That's our idea for holding [the ceremony] at Sepi. Although we [you and I] have not found who will be the paramount chief, this might be the work of the Church and all the people in the council; and especially all the people are for finding out who will be the paramount chief. In our system according to our custom, we do not have an election . . . for finding out who will be the paramount chief; we should follow our own way, follow our custom. (My transcription from tape recording)

Here Tuti assumed the voice that would be expected of him as a representative of Santa Isabel knowledgeable of events and issues in the wider national arena. He located the origins of the idea in that larger context by ascribing it to an initiative of the Governing Council. The Santa Isabel event was thus part of a mandate to put up paramount chief(s) on every island "according to their custom." Although Tuti referred to the national mandate, he emphasized that implementing the idea ultimately derived

from "our custom." This invocation of both national events and "custom" was more than expedient rhetoric. It reflected the syncretic character of the paramount chief (and of chiefship in general). "Our custom" referred to the things Santa Isabel people ordinarily did, independent of government procedures and such peculiar exercises as elections.

In July 1975 Tuti was installed as paramount chief in a large islandwide ceremony. When I talked with Willie Betu the day before the installation ceremony, he indicated that he could foresee the possibility of the paramount chief setting a precedent for new forms of provincial government that might emerge after independence. In his view, the position could be a prototype for a kind of provincial governor. Tuti had voiced a similar view before the ceremony at Sepi. He envisioned the paramount chief as part of an islandwide body of chiefs representing each "district." He also speculated about the possibility of these chiefs, with the paramount chief, forming a future government council.

Once Tuti was installed as paramount chief, he began thinking more specifically about how to implement his vision. For example, he said that he wanted to convene a meeting of chiefs from each "district," possibly seven in number, who would meet to discuss matters of "custom" and "development." When Tuti announced in 1980 that he would retire as bishop in two years time, one of his reasons was that he wished to devote more of his time to the work of the paramount chief. Events since then have seen these visions gradually take shape, although the gap between the activities of chiefs and the formal institutions of government remains a continuing source of difficulty.

Just at the time that Tuti retired as bishop of Santa Isabel, he began a collaboration that proved important in enabling the formal involvement of chiefs in island governance. In each manifestation of the paramount chief, alliance between the aspiring chief and one or more persons who occupied positions of influence in the church or government was an important factor in linking the position with wider institutions. In this case, in post-independence Solomon Islands, that person was Dennis Lulei, an influential leader (and one of the first Santa Isabel men to receive a university degree) who was also one of the island's two members of parliament between 1980 and 1988. According to Tuti, after Lulei first was elected, he sought out Tuti in order to jointly formulate plans for developing a council of chiefs under the aegis of the paramount chief.

During the 1980s Tuti as paramount chief and Lulei as secretary to the

emerging Council of Chiefs led efforts to create a chiefs' council—a quasi-bureaucratic structure for involving chiefs in the management of island affairs. These efforts consisted mainly of large meetings of chiefs held to discuss all manner of issues connected with "development," including lengthy debate about just how the Council of Chiefs should constitute itself. Much of this interest in formalizing political roles for "traditional chiefs" was connected with the formidable problems and conflicts surrounding land ownership. With new possibilities for commercial development in the form of mining, forestry, and fisheries fueling divisive disputes about land, local political leaders sought ways of resolving land conflicts. Since the chief was above all else a spokesman for land-owning descent groups, talk of somehow formalizing the chief's status in government aimed at legitimizing chiefly pronouncements in the context of national legal discourse. This was precisely the intent of the amendment to the Local Courts Act passed by the National Parliament in 1985 to ensure that "chiefs" heard land cases before they were taken to the court system.

Space does not allow a detailed review of the process by which the idea of a council of chiefs has become a political reality in Santa Isabel, but a brief sketch will indicate the level of interest in and activity toward one that has been sustained for more than fifteen years. The picture that emerges is one of an evolving discussion about how to go about instituting a new political entity. Even now, years after a 1984 meeting billed as the "first meeting of the Council of Chiefs," details of its composition and responsibilities remain in flux. Indeed, this persistent fluidity (resisting bureaucratic fixity) is one of the puzzles posed by the discourse of chiefs in Santa Isabel—a puzzle considered briefly in the next section of this paper.

A large "meeting of chiefs" attended by the premier of the Provincial Assembly and the new bishop of Santa Isabel (among others) convened near Tuti's house adjacent to the provincial government center in April 1983. That meeting discussed a plan to form a council of chiefs by having each of five areas or "districts" select a representative chief. Within a year, the first meeting of the proposed Council of Chiefs was held at the same location in March 1984. As an indication of the growing legitimacy of these moves to incorporate chiefs in government, this meeting also was attended by the provincial premier and secretary. At the meeting the number of districts was expanded to six and the selection of members was left up to the paramount chief.

In that same year, before the March Council of Chiefs meeting, the

Santa Isabel Provincial Assembly, made up of fifteen elected members, passed a resolution allowing for the Council of Chiefs to select six persons, one from each of six districts, to participate in assembly meetings as "appointed members." Indeed, six such members participated in the next assembly meeting in June 1984, just a few months after the first Council of Chiefs meeting. The assembly meeting passed a "Council of Chiefs" resolution that began, "BE IT RESOLVED that the Isabel Provincial Assembly recognize the existence and traditional role of the Council of Chiefs, their powers with respect to matters of tradition and custom . . ." This document went on to enumerate areas where chiefs exercised power in local life, focusing mainly on land and genealogy. Beyond that, the document spelled out the role of the Council of Chiefs as essentially "promoting traditions and customs" and "making recommendations" on such matters to the various bodies of local government.

Although the provincial premier and others indicated at an early stage that a portion of the provincial budget was earmarked for support of travel by the chiefs, financial support did not materialize through government channels. At one point the District of Bughotu formed its own Council of Chiefs and the government Area Council approved its request for support in the amount of SI$1200 (at the time about US$700), only to have the request denied by the provincial executive office. The extent to which new powers and resources may devolve to chiefs through such a process remains uncertain. But to examine this resurgent rhetoric of chiefs and custom only in the context of bureaucratic institutions would miss the fundamental point that the *process* of meeting, discussing, planning, and creating itself constitutes a discourse or set of truths of the type envisioned by those who talk of a role for chiefs in island affairs (cf Brison 1989).

Once plans for a council of chiefs were laid with the provincial government in 1984, Tuti and Lulei traveled to every district to convene meetings for the selection of "district chiefs" who would constitute district-level councils analogous to the provincial government's "area councils." And, in a manner similar to that in which "church chiefs" were instituted in the 1930s by Richard Fallowes, these selections were then ritually validated in a church service in which Tuti the retired bishop would bless the chiefs and give them certificates signed by him as paramount chief. But these meetings did more than select chiefs. They also provided a new set of contexts for local-level discussions of politics, economic projects, and cultural change—discussions that had always taken place in village meetings, but

were now cast in the global rhetoric of modernization and economic development. By defining these meetings as congregations of "chiefs" or a district's "house of chiefs," these "conferences" or "seminars" as they were called worked to reframe political discussion as organized in terms of local polities, and not the more arbitrary definitions of a national bureaucracy. Roger Keesing stated this succinctly in referring to similar activities among the Kwara'ae of Malaita: "The rise of the new 'paramount chiefs' and 'tribal chiefs' represents an attempt to keep Kwara'ae Kwara'ae" (1982, 370).

Meetings and festivities organized under the aegis of the Council of Chiefs make cultural sense by framing their purpose in terms of localized definitions rather than the decentered discourse of a modern nation state. But the hybrid form of these meetings, incorporating elements from national institutions and the idiom of modern development, may also evoke questions and puzzlement. When I participated in one such meeting held in 1987 to bless chiefs from one of the districts and at the same time to conduct a "development seminar," one of the participants grumbled to me that he and some others were confused by the presentations on this occasion, many of which were from experts invited from various government ministries to speak on development issues.

During recent years the topic of chiefs and their role in island life has become a common theme on ceremonial occasions attended by national and foreign dignitaries. For example, the day chosen to mark the provincial government's anniversary is now also designated as "Chiefs' Day." And, in March 1987, Prime Minister Ezekiel Alebua was invited along with other national dignitaries to the "annual convention of chiefs" held at the Bughotu village of Nagolau. On this occasion and others like it, the idiom of custom provided a language of shared values and identity that symbolically linked national and local institutions.

Tuti's installation as paramount chief and the subsequent effort to form a council of chiefs must be seen in the context of regional efforts to find "paramount chiefs" in many of the islands that make up the independent Solomon Islands. During the year following the ceremony at Sepi, parallel events were unfolding in the Kwara'ae area of neighboring Malaita. Three paramount chiefs were selected in West Kwara'ae (David Gegeo, pers comm), and numerous others in the eastern district. These activities led to a major meeting in 1978 at Auki on Malaita at which some one hundred eighty men were designated as "chiefs" to act as upholders of custom (Burt

1982, 393–394; Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo 1991, 13). These activities continue today in other areas where attempts are being made to reconstruct positions of chiefly leadership. In June 1988 about four thousand people from Guadalcanal attended a ceremony to install outgoing Governor General Sir Baddeley Devesi as paramount chief of the Tasimboko area of that island. And in the same year local leaders on Nggela, seeking to model their efforts on the experience of Santa Isabel, invited Paramount Chief Dudley Tuti to speak to them at a meeting to discuss plans for "chiefs" and "paramount chiefs" in their society. Extending the scope of regional influences even further, Tuti and Member of Parliament Lulei were planning a trip to Fiji to learn about its council of chiefs when the 1987 military coup backed by the Great Council of Chiefs there led them to abort their plans.

As previously noted, these various regional efforts to revitalize "traditional chiefs" were given impetus by national political developments that had produced periodic statements affirming their importance for local government. Beginning with the Governing Council before independence, and recorded in a constitutional provision acknowledging "the role of traditional chiefs" (Section 114[2]), the topic of chiefly leadership recently was given further attention by a national committee established to review the structure of provincial government. This committee devoted a chapter of its report to "The desire to involve Chiefs and Traditional Leaders more fully in the process of Government at both Provincial and rural levels of Solomon Islands Community" (SI 1987, 63–67). That the thrust of this report was closely in line with the direction of events on Santa Isabel reflects the fact that the committee was chaired by Dennis Lulei, at that time a member of parliament and secretary to the Santa Isabel Council of Chiefs.

This report recommended that national and provincial governments should encourage chiefly involvement in government in a variety of ways, including the establishment of chief councils in all provinces, and national support for overseas educational tours by chiefs and annual chief conventions. In addition, the report recommended that the Solomon Islands Constitution be amended to require provincial assemblies to "legislate the roles and functions of chiefs" (SI 1987, 66). For Santa Isabel this action had already been taken in 1984 with the Provincial Assembly's Council of Chiefs Resolution.

The irony here is that the report reproduced the dominance of government as the source of legislative initiative and funding. Although intended

to enhance the visibility and legitimacy of chiefs, the report's own recommendations bracketed the role of chiefs within specified structures of the state apparatus. The report asked whether chiefs should be appointed to the National Parliament or the provincial assemblies and concluded that "the rightful place for chiefs is at the Area Council level" (SI 1987, 66). In other words, the plan for empowering chiefs was to fit them within a specified niche in the government's bureaucratic apparatus—specifically, the Area Council—the most local of local government, composed of village representatives reporting to the Provincial Assembly.

To what extent are current attempts to create paramount chiefs and councils of chiefs, such as that underway in Santa Isabel, evoked and shaped by the categories and institutions of centralized government? How far does colonial discourse exert an influence over local meanings? Since many of the Provincial Review Committee's recommendations already have been implemented or are underway on Santa Isabel, events there reveal the cultural dynamics of the seemingly ironic enterprise of strengthening chiefs through government.

As already pointed out, one of Santa Isabel's first national politicians, Willie Betu, was a catalyst for the installation of Dudley Tuti as paramount chief (actually scripting a program for the event). And, as has been shown, Dudley Tuti himself discussed the rationale for the installation ceremony in terms of the national agenda of promoting traditional chiefs in government. Yet from the perspective of many local participants, the installation of Tuti as paramount chief and the attempts to empower "traditional chiefs" manifested cultural understandings of person and history that were strongly rooted in local experience.

Custom Chiefs, Contested Concepts

Now that it is several years since the Isabel Provincial Assembly passed its Council of Chiefs Resolution in 1984, and since Dudley Tuti retired as bishop to concentrate on his role as paramount chief, what developments have taken place with regard to the status of custom chiefs? The answer was given best by Dudley Tuti himself in his speech before a meeting billed as the eighth meeting of the Isabel Council of Chiefs on 16 May 1990, when he commented that the role of chiefs with regard to the Council of Chiefs was not well understood and that there was a need for wider recognition:

> For eight years now since the Council of Chiefs came into existence and yet many people wish to know the roles of the chiefs and I would dare to say that the roles of the chiefs are not new from the ones that have been exercised by our forefathers of the past. . . .
>
> There is not a village in Isabel without a chief and it is in the interest of our people to encourage, recognise and maintain the chieftain system, and because of its important concept it still prevails in our own society. But it needs wider recognition. It needs to be accorded some recognized status and functions by both Provincial and National government. (Tuti 1990, slightly edited)

Having said this, Tuti went on to outline some of the roles and functions of chiefs, much as they were specified in the Provincial Assembly's 1984 resolution, including "promoting unity," "taking care of land and custom," "organizing feasts and celebrations," and "promoting the work of church and government" (Tuti 1990).

Fifteen years earlier, when Tuti first was installed as paramount chief, he framed the purpose and the needs of reviving chiefly leadership in Santa Isabel in very much the same language. When addressing a large Christmas feast in 1975 (in English, with translation), he spoke about the meaning of the paramount chief position as follows:

> People ask me, "what is your job as a paramount chief?" But my answer is this. [The] paramount chief is not yet completed. There are other people in every area, in every village who are chiefs in their right. People look up to them. . . . So those [chiefs] got to be recognized first. They are still here, but we are misled by the new election of members in the Council, head people in the districts. But you know them. In the village you know them. In the district you know them. So those people got to be brought back. (Dudley Tuti, 24 Dec 1975, tape recorded)

Comparing these statements across the fifteen-year interval that has seen extensive discussions of the role of chiefs in government, these questions arise: Why has there been so little change in the institutional position of chiefs? and Why is the agenda for empowering chiefs more or less the same today as it was in 1975? (cf Akin 1985). One explanation might be the difficulties of enacting national legislation on these matters in a country that grapples with a wide spectrum of regional and cultural diversity.[5] Yet there have been significant national initiatives during these intervening years to promote roles for chiefs in government, such as the 1985 amendment to the Local Courts Act, and the Provincial Government Review

Committee of 1986–1987. Why, then, do chiefs remain symbolically potent but politically marginal?

One approach to this question would be to use the anthropological distinction of chiefs and big men to question the authenticity of government-sponsored "chiefs" in societies characterized by fluid, personalistic forms of leadership. One might speculate that the problems of institutionalizing "chief systems" stem from attempting to graft invented chiefs onto actual big-man systems. While appealing in some respects, this explanation draws on definitional differences between chiefs and big men, and between "invented" and "authentic" culture, that obscure the cultural and historical processes that have sustained local discourses of chiefs for most of colonial history.

Without presuming a categorical distinction between big men and chiefs, one might consider the different premises that underlie talk about chiefs in government circles as opposed to the everyday contexts of village life. The latest round of discussion and debate (which is but the latest phase of a much longer history of debate) is essentially a kind of translation exercise, an attempt to legitimize or empower chiefly status by translating it into the systematic forms of Western government. Ultimately, however, efforts to conjoin these realms are constrained by differences in their assumptions and purposes.

Talk of chiefs from national politicians and government committees tends to objectify its subject matter as a static reality that simply requires a concerted attempt at codification to bring leaders called "chiefs" into active participation in government. As an example, consider the report of the Provincial Government Review Committee. That report acknowledged regional variation in leadership types in the Solomon Islands, but it overlooked both the syncretic quality of chiefs capable of becoming "church chiefs" and the like, and the inherent ambiguity and variability in "chief" statuses in any given area.

On the first point, when the report spelled out possible ways that the government might support or formalize the position of chiefs, it presumed a concept of "chiefs" and "chieftain system" that was separate from the forces of modernization:

> The impositions of modern bureaucracy, the dominance of religious leaders and the withering away of chiefs' powers and influences by political and administrative machineries have had a cumulative effect on our traditional

> leaders. Whilst it is true that chiefs are generally respected and their services are still called on by politicians and the government, the traditional leaders have been stripped of their once political and social authority. Even their legitimacy and existence have been questioned. (SI 1987, 65)

By using a language of objectification, the report implied that there was an identifiable set of "traditional leaders" separate from leaders in church and government. For Santa Isabel this presumption glossed over the long history of adaptation that produced syncretic or combined forms of leadership of all sorts. From the early years of Christianization and colonization, chiefs were extensively involved in the institutions of both church and government. All the powerful district headmen during the colonial period were also among the most prominent chiefs on the island. Two of these are commonly cited as previous paramount chiefs. Other well-known chiefs were catechists and priests in the Anglican church. And, of course, the present paramount chief was also the island's first bishop. Even one of the principal authors of the report cited earlier, Dennis Lulei, expressed a more open-ended view of chiefs as any important leader with local legitimacy. Speaking in parliament in favor of an amendment that would empower chiefs to decide land cases, Lulei observed that the parliamentarians themselves are chiefs: "All of us here or most of us in our traditional way where we come from; we are Chiefs in our own way, when you go back home you are regarded as somebody in a Society a very big man you are a Chief." (SI 1985*a*, 578).[6]

Seen in the perspective of this history of evolving creolisms, chiefship is better regarded as an adaptable model and set of practices than as an objective position with a fixed set of rights and duties. For example, the position of paramount chief in Santa Isabel is overtly a syncretic status, combining elements of Christianity and custom that give it much of its cultural and emotional power. When Tuti was installed as paramount chief, the ceremony was conducted as a church communion service in which the Anglican archbishop "anointed" Tuti as paramount chief at the event's climax. Indeed, Christian terms and concepts have been regularly appropriated through history to reconstitute and reinvigorate chiefly leadership, as in Welchman's association with Soga and Richard Fallowes' installation of "church chiefs." These historical appropriations are also reflected in understandings of custom as something that consists of both "good" and "bad" elements that may be selectively applied and transformed. For

example, in one of his speeches just after being installed as paramount chief in July 1975, Tuti described his new job as

> finding out about our tradition, our custom, our culture. . . . Because if we only base our thinking, our progress in our own culture, we will go forward. But not what our grandfathers used to do. . . . Maybe in all our chiefs before there were different kinds of paramount chief. Maybe there was hatred in them. And there were people who grab people's property. . . . And now we are in Christianity . . . probably one of the jobs of the paramount chief [is] to unite the people.

Tuti here expressed a widely shared view of the Santa Isabel paramount chief as a vehicle for integrating desirable aspects of both custom and Christianity.

In some instances, innovations may also be questioned or contested by invoking local ideas about the strictly traditional. Such challenges are often available. For example, when the relatives of one aspiring chief said that he might be "ordained" *(taofi)* at an upcoming feast, others pointed out that such a rite should be reserved for priests. Similar arguments also occur elsewhere in Christian Melanesia, as in a recent controversy reported for Emae Island in Vanuatu, where people argued about the legitimacy of "ordaining" a paramount chief for that island (*vw*, 8 June 1990).

In addition to difficulties in discussing chiefs as a discrete, isolable status, attempts to institutionalize the involvement of "traditional leaders" in government grapple with the problem of how to formalize modes of leadership that tend to be both personal and variable. In Santa Isabel, as in most Melanesian societies that lack formalized titles, the extent of chiefly powers is usually implicit and open to contention. The authority of powerful chiefs extends across a gradient of influence from village-level leadership to entire regions and even islands. Hence, efforts to formalize the multiple, overlapping, and ambiguous claims of chiefs in the form of bureaucratic categories and structures inevitably evoke disagreements and debate.

Even though Dudley Tuti as bishop and paramount chief has achieved a degree of power and prominence unique in the large Melanesian islands of the Solomons, even the process of installing him as paramount chief was not without voices of discontent. When Willie Betu put forward his plan for reviving the paramount chiefship to be discussed further around the

island, the island's main government body—the Isabel District Council, composed mostly of young elected members—decided to discuss the status of paramount chief among their various constituencies. As the primary body of local government administration for the island, the council discussed the idea of instituting a paramount chief as part of district government and eventually decided to reject it. As already seen, despite the fact that the council reached this determination in two meetings in 1974 and again in January 1975, most of the island's population enthusiastically supported the large celebration and ceremony that installed Tuti as paramount chief in July 1975.

At least one local ethnographer writing about cultural traditions and chiefship in his area of Santa Isabel made a point of qualifying the extent of the influence of the paramount chief. He explicitly denied that Soga, the man known as the first paramount chief, was ever the chief of the whole island, and noted that Soga achieved his influence by virtue of his involvement with the mission's work of conversion. "As for Soga, he was one of the chiefs of his own tribe not the chief of Ysabel, as mentioned in some history books. It was only through the influence of christianity [*sic*] which he helped exert over other chiefs that made him famous. Had he not been the first converted chief, people would never believe that Soga was chief" (Naramana 1987, 45). In asserting that Soga's chiefly power was circumscribed by the limits of his "tribal" domain, the author (from a neighboring language group) argued a point that is generally accepted: Soga the paramount chief was a product of the mission era. However, the fact that Naramana made this assertion reflects the worries about the limits of chiefly power that frequently surround prominent chiefs. Chiefly status in Santa Isabel is always open to expansion or contraction. The extent of any one individual's influence usually remains implicit and subject to multiple interpretations. As the boundaries of influence become the object of overt discussion, as in deliberations about how many chiefs should make up the Council of Chiefs, how they should be selected, and what powers they should wield, disagreements are bound to emerge that are more likely to produce long debates about custom and politics than decisive changes in institutional arrangements.

Even though there has been little change in the legal status of chiefs, it would be a mistake to measure the significance of the movement to reinvigorate chiefly leadership with the legalistic yardstick of legislation passed or government bodies created. In between Tuti's two speeches

quoted here, villagers all over the island repeatedly organized feasts, celebrations, and meetings defined as occasions for deliberations of chiefs dealing not only with the parameters of their own involvement in island affairs, but with all kinds of contemporary social and economic issues. Although these efforts might appear to the instrumentally minded outsider to have produced little practical result, they did go a long way toward creating the reality of a political discourse centered on local "chiefs." That discourse is given further credibility by virtue of government statements regarding the desirability of strengthening "traditional chiefs," even if the institutional arrangements for implementation are slow to emerge. Some people may contest the authenticity or legitimacy of district chiefs and councils, but these phenomena are to a large extent just what they say they are. And the "say" is important here because talk in most Pacific societies, especially political talk, often constitutes the reality it seeks to represent (Brenneis and Myers 1984; Brison 1988; Watson-Gegeo and White 1990). The fact that "chiefs" are discussed, and discussed often, in major political and ritual events is a constant reminder that, in the postcolonial era, "chiefs" constitute a strong focus for cultural value and aspiration rather than a shrinking remnant of a past way of life.

Chiefs, and the paramount chief in particular, are integrative symbols that have acquired particular significance for the people of Santa Isabel in light of the historical circumstances of Christianization and colonization. Furthermore, as stated at the outset, models of chiefs relate to broader concepts of moral and social conduct. With the advent of new types of leadership through church and government, the prototypic chief is conceived of as an exemplar of the indigenous, of local modes of thought and action that contrast with Western (especially government) ways. The chief personifies aspects of cultural value and identity that are seen increasingly as threatened by the incursion of Western individualism or materialism. From this perspective, talk of chiefs and efforts to incorporate them in government become at once a mode of resistance and an attempt at revitalization.

Certain of the themes expressed in bold relief through the more visible activities of the paramount chief are also evident in quieter forms of talk about chiefs as a focus for customary practice. For example, in one village meeting I recorded in 1975 two cousins argued about an incident that landed them in court. The argument focused on the way the incident was handled, in that the police were called in before attempting to resolve the

problem through talk and the mediation of village chiefs. Although the two men disagreed about the role of the police, the court, and chiefs in this particular incident, they both expressed similar assumptions about chiefs as agents of tradition and community-based practices in contrast to the institutions of modern government such as the police and the courts. As one cousin stated,

> When these things happen we should first work them out among ourselves. We handle it ourselves before concluding, "This business is bad, it's suitable for that place [the district court]." That could have happened with this business. . . . Chiefs are supposed to do this, are supposed to decide about these things with us. . . . Modern ways are alive now. The way previously would have been to be sympathetic with a person before going that way [to court].

In this fragment of conversation the speaker recreates local understandings about the opposition of custom and modernity in his talk about working things out "among ourselves"—with chiefs—rather than resorting to coercive forces centered outside the community.[7] In this context, talk of chiefs constitutes a kind of counter-discourse based on ideas about desired forms of social conduct and interpersonal relations. Such perceptions of the progressive encroachment of the government on the power of chiefs reflect larger narratives of historical accommodation (see White 1991). These ongoing processes of historical transformation are constituted in and through local understandings of persons and chiefs.

Conclusion

Having described some of the contemporary talk about chiefs in Santa Isabel, what may I say about the issues of cultural invention raised at the beginning of this paper? Inevitably, the mixing of a rhetoric of the old with the politics of the new raises questions of cultural authenticity. On the one hand, attempts to "revive" chiefly leadership by creating new roles for chiefs in government are giving chiefship new significance. On the other, these efforts also draw on cultural models and historical antecedents that have considerable depth—a tradition, as it were.

Whereas recent discussions of the issue of authenticity have questioned static or reified concepts of tradition by noting that culture and tradition are always (re)constructed in the present (Jolly, this issue; Linnekin 1991), the case of Santa Isabel chiefs illustrates a process of "invention" that

enjoys a substantial tradition, dating to the earliest moments of contact with the West and probably earlier. Colonial history in Santa Isabel, as in many parts of the Solomons, is marked by periodic attempts to remake or revitalize local leadership through the installation of new kinds of chiefs. In Santa Isabel this episodic history is expressed most vividly in the occasional installation of "paramount chiefs" who have emerged at critical historical moments to aspire to positions of islandwide influence made possible through association with the church (cf Naramana 1987; Zeva 1983).

For Santa Isabel people who reflect about such things, the notion of "paramount chief," like the related concepts of "Christian chief" or "church chief," is avowedly a creation of mission society. At the same time, however, these ideas include self-conscious conceptions of "custom" —of practices regarded as old, local, and indigenous as opposed to the new, foreign, and introduced. Whatever the antiquity of these externalizations of custom, they incorporate understandings about persons and power that are basic to local experience and modes of leadership. As in previous episodes of attempted revitalization, the latest round emerges in the *conjunction* of local processes with political developments centered outside the island (cf Sahlins 1985). Whereas impetus for a council of chiefs originates in the politics of a postcolonial Melanesian state, local meanings and motivations are shaped by long-standing ideas about the nature of persons and leadership (as well as about colonial experience). It would be a mistake to assign conceptual priority to either the indigenous or the exogenous in this encounter. Chiefs are symbolic mediators, constituting objects of reflection in which ideas about identity and change contend for a hearing, whether in parliamentary debate or in village meetings. In the process, both indigenous and Western categories are susceptible to transformation.

The fact that recent attempts at chiefly revitalization have yet to formalize positions of chiefship within government suggests that local discourses are not readily assimilated into bureaucratized schemes of state-sponsored chiefs. Whereas local models center on contingent personal qualities and social practices, official discourse would inscribe power in formalized chiefly offices. Here the anthropological distinction between "big men" and "chiefs"—problematic as it may be as a comparative typology—is useful in pointing to the kinds of ambiguity and ambivalence associated with the person-centered forms of leadership found in many Melanesian societies. Not only do national initiatives run up against the

problem of regional diversity (in a country of more than sixty language groups), but within any one area, leadership practices depend on a degree of fluidity and ambiguity that resists legal codification. Any individual's status as chief is likely to overlap with that of others. Furthermore, claims to chiefly status emerge through time as individual careers combine multiple identities and activities. Parliamentary debate on the subject of traditional chiefs suggests that national politicians are themselves aware of many of these ambiguities, and that legislation is written in ways that accommodate a range of definitions.

Returning, then, to the initial question, What is this resurgent talk of chiefs all about? it is apparent that there is more to it than an attempt to create new government positions. Given that, in Santa Isabel, there have now been nearly twenty years of discussion about new roles for chiefs in government, and that these discussions have produced very little institutional change, one might be pardoned for concluding that the process has no real political consequence, or that it is mainly an exercise in rhetoric. Such a conclusion, however, would miss the power of talk to constitute local social realities. The last two decades in Santa Isabel have seen sustained discussions and ritual activities focusing on chiefs as symbols of local identity and power. These activities reconstitute meanings and interests that extend throughout the island's colonial history. Although "traditional chiefs" have yet to be empowered in any substantial way, the continuing talk about chiefs establishes and maintains a discursive space that might otherwise be crowded out by global modernizing forces, especially the institutions of church and state that have fundamentally transformed Santa Isabel society. Perhaps one of the reasons that the short postcolonial history of new Melanesian states has produced so many surprises for outside observers is the failure to anticipate the potential force of local culture as a means of redefining political futures.

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Notes

1 In line with current usages of the term *discourse,* the title of this paper refers to discourses *of* chiefs in the sense that it is about discussions of chiefly status that are not only *by* chiefs or *about* chiefs, but also work to constitute their status in the contemporary milieu. I use quotation marks here and elsewhere in this paper to indicate that I am referring to commonly used English-language phrasings.

2 Western Samoa now has extended voting privileges to women; and commoner members of the Tongan parliament are seeking a greater transfer of power from the nobles in parliament to elected representatives.

3 Many other examples could be cited of legislative interest in "traditional chiefs" elsewhere in the Pacific. For example, in Bougainville—another society troubled by deep national divisions and military confrontation—district chief councils sought to represent local interests in national and international discussions. In the French colonial territory of New Caledonia, the high commissioner recently met for the first time with the territory's Council of Traditional Chiefs and is reported to have said that the council "had a voice in most major questions in the territory" (RA, 9 Feb 1991). In the Federated States of Micronesia one of the amendments produced by a recent constitutional convention concerned the creation of a "chamber of traditional chiefs" which would "advise on and promote custom and tradition as well as promote peace and unity in the FSM" (*JKRM* 1991, 4).

4 The now classic distinction between the personalistic, achieved legitimacy of the Melanesian "big man" and the inherited, titled position of the Polynesian "chief" (Sahlins 1963) has been increasingly challenged as a basis for interpreting the many varieties of Melanesian leadership, especially those of eastern Melanesia in the Solomons, Vanuatu, and New Caledonia (Douglas 1979; Allen 1984; Lilley 1985; Pawley 1982). Ironically, these challenges come at a time when the term "big man" has become almost standard usage in writings about the Pacific, including those by Melanesian authors (eg, Alasia 1989; Kaima 1987).

5 An example here would be the comments of some of the members of the national parliament during debate on the 1985 amendment to the Local Courts Act which empowered chiefs to hear land cases before they were taken to the formal court system. During that debate, the member from northeast Guadalcanal commented: "My contention really is that I find that in my own area we do not really have chiefs as such, land matters are dealt with by people who know about land matters [but] they do not necessarily have to be chiefs. They could either be tribal leaders or heads of families and so forth" (SI 1985*a*, 594).

6 The legislation produced from these discussions sidestepped the definitional problems associated with such open-ended conceptions by defining "chief" in

terms of itself: " 'chiefs' means chief or other traditional leaders residing within the locality of the land in dispute who are recognised as such by both parties in the dispute" (SI 1985*b*, 4).

7 The cousins' contrast between local, chiefly styles of dealing with conflict and modern legalistic methods reflects the comments by Andrew Nori, member of parliament, during the parliamentary debates about the Local Courts Act amendment. Nori, principal sponsor of the act, described its purpose in terms of the ideals of Melanesian consensus and reciprocity (as opposed to Western confrontational practices): "In Solomon Islands Mr. Speaker whenever there is a dispute whether it be over land ownership . . . or an infringement of customary norms, the basic aims of those persons entrusted with the responsibility of resolving the dispute is not winning or losing, their aim is to bring about happiness, friendship, peace and harmony in the community; in the end . . . there may be a feast which will reduce tension and human relationships [will be] normalised" (SI 1985*a*, 571).

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